

Katie Normington. *Gender and Medieval Drama*.  
(Gender in the Middle Ages.) D. S. Brewer, 2004.  
pp. ix + 158.

**T**his slim volume, the first in Brewer's new "Gender in the Middle Ages" series, is also essentially the first academic monograph devoted explicitly to an analysis of the gender politics of the medieval English cycle play. (The publisher's title is thus somewhat misleading in its use of "Medieval Drama" as a generic placeholder.) As author Katie Normington's footnotes demonstrate, there has been a lively discussion about the position of women in cycle drama over the last three decades—but that discussion has hitherto largely been confined to the pages of journals and anthologies. *Gender and Medieval Drama* is thus poised to give the debate over women in drama a new visibility.

Normington's book falls into two sections. The first, "Performing Gender," consists of four chapters devoted to the material circumstances of cycle play production and their gendered dimension. Chapter 1,

"Women and History," provides an overview of the specific socio-economic conditions limiting female agency in the late medieval and early Tudor city. Normington pays particular attention to urban trade, noting that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a sizeable (and seemingly deliberate) reduction in the economic opportunities available to women. In Chapter 2, "Gender and Performance," Normington moves from macrocosm to microcosm: here she focuses on the evidence for direct female involvement in the production of the English cycle plays. Female spectators and performers are both addressed in this chapter (although Normington has to turn to liturgical convent "dramas" and to festive culture, both areas beyond the generic boundaries of her study, to locate women "on stage" in medieval England). In a welcome development, Normington also looks at the "backstage" tasks undertaken by various English women—a relatively

neglected aspect of previous studies on gender and early drama. Building on the work of Claire Sponsler in medieval drama studies and a plethora of Renaissance drama critics, Chapter 3, "Cross-Dressing and Performance," examines the semiotics of male cross-dressing. Here Normington argues that the aesthetic distance generated by the spectacle of men impersonating women actually contributes to the cycle plays' exploration of women's concerns: without the scandalous presence of female bodies speaking in public, audiences can concentrate on the issues raised by the plays' female characters. Finally, in Chapter 4, "Signifying Women," Normington looks at the intersection of medieval thought on female bodies and the cycle plays' Eucharistic emphasis on the body of Christ as the body politic. The most noteworthy aspect of this chapter (and possibly the strongest section of the entire book) is Normington's analysis of how gender affects the spatial and local aspects of the plays: in addition to showing how traditional gender divisions map onto the plays' locus and platea

staging, she also offers some tantalizing hints about the plays' contribution to the division of urban space into masculine and feminine sectors.

"Representing Gender," the second section of the book, is much shorter than its predecessor. Here Normington gives us two chapters on the performative depiction of the various cycles' female characters. A common concern throughout the section is the tendency of prior drama critics to judge female characters by the standards of salvation history and typological structure. Normington argues instead for a reading of the plays' female characters that demonstrates how these women "test the boundaries of their conventional roles" (91). Chapter 5, "Holy Women," emphasizes the transgressive nature of both the Virgin and the Magdalene. The former oscillates between meek obedience and awesome power, while the sinful origins of the latter give her a broader iconic range. Indeed, unlike the chaste Virgin, the Magdalene is "a sexed body who enjoys power" (104). In Chapter 6, "Vulgar Women," Normington puts such



characters as Mrs. Noah and Dame Procula into particular socio-cultural contexts—an act aimed at complicating traditional readings of these characters' shrewish natures. For Normington, Mrs. Noah becomes "a woman attempting to find an identity and preserve her right to work in an increasingly structured man-made world" (132); Pilate's wife, Dame Procula, is a subversive woman whose insistence on her right to speak undermines the strictures of conduct books aimed at enforcing aristocratic female silence.

A substantial amount of research has gone into *Gender and Medieval Drama*, making the book a solid survey of pre-2000 feminist criticism on early drama. However, as a study of early drama in general, Normington's book falters: it overlooks some of the biggest developments in the last decade of early drama studies. For example, *Gender and Medieval Drama* accepts that the cycle play (à la V. A. Kolve) is a coherent medieval English drama. But the work of (among others) Alexandra Johnston has seriously

undermined the idea that anything like Kolve's Corpus Christi cycle ever existed. N-Town is now understood to be a manuscript anthology of plays from multiple performance circumstances; Chester, a late Tudor Whitsun cycle; and Towneley (according to the research of Barbara Palmer), a post-medieval recusant collection of various Yorkshire and Lancashire plays. Only York remains a Corpus Christi cycle in the classical sense—but as a *sui generis* production instead of the pinnacle of a ubiquitous English genre. Normington's analysis of the Towneley cycle also falls victim to this curious critical oversight: she talks confidently of cycle production in Wakefield, ignoring crucial 1990s articles by Palmer and Garrett Epp that explode the notion of a cycle play ever taking place in that location.

Put another way, *Gender and Medieval Drama* is stronger on "gender" than it is on "medieval drama." Undergraduates, graduate students, and non-specialist faculty reading this book will find much here of value. Normington's Chapter 4 arguments on space and gender

in the plays are particularly insightful, even to a specialist audience. (I wanted to see Normington do more with her excellent point about the role the cycle route played in inscribing gender on civic topography.) But these same readers will need to read *Gender and Medieval Drama* with a careful and critical eye: Normington's decision to center her study on the genre of the Corpus Christi cycle brings with it a number of increasingly tenuous (if not now outmoded) assumptions about that genre and about early English drama in general.

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